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# ELF IN MODEL UNITED NATIONS SIMULATIONS

## When East meets West

DONNA TATSUKI  
KOBE CITY UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN STUDIES

**Abstract** – MUN simulations can be considered a community of practice since they possess Wenger's (1998) three criteria – mutual engagement, a negotiated joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire. House (2003) argues that ELF too can be considered a community of practice since “its diffuse alliances and communities of imagination and alignment fits ELF interactions well because ELF participants have heterogeneous backgrounds and diverse social and linguistic expectations” (p. 573). Speaking English as an L1 offers no guarantee of an ability to interact successfully with a wide variety of interlocutors; there are many varieties of English, many of which are mutually incomprehensible (Ur 2010) and similarly, native speakers of these many varieties of English are not guaranteed to be successful interlocutors with users of ELF (Litzenberg 2013). Indeed, English native speakers are in especially acute need of training to adjust to a lingua franca world (Carey 2013). This short paper will report on observations of ELF-speaking MUN delegates from Japan and Germany to get a sense of some of the shortcomings that native speakers display when communicating with ELF speakers in the context of MUN simulations and will make recommendations for their training.

**Keywords:** community of practice; MUN simulations; comprehensibility; English Lingua Franca; communication strategies.

*The speaker must choose a comprehensible  
[verständlich] expression so that speaker  
and hearer can understand one another.*

(J. Habermas (1979) cited in:  
W. Ulrich (1983), *Critical heuristics of social planning*, p. 123).

## 1. Introduction

For several years, I have been deeply involved with Model United Nations simulations, both from the side of the preparation of delegates/running the event, and in terms of researching aspects of the experience itself. This paper will report on a small section of my ongoing research into MUN interactions. While observing MUN simulations around the world, I have noticed that even though our students are highly proficient users of English,

they face tremendous difficulties gaining and maintaining the conversational floor during caucusing sessions. Furthermore, despite their own fluency and English knowledge they have experienced sudden moments of personal doubt because they were unable to follow or contribute to exchanges monopolized by native speaker delegates. By being shut out of the negotiation process there is no way to ensure that their policies and ideas would become included into the working papers that form the basis of the important draft resolutions.

I began to wonder if the burden of communication, comprehension, and cooperation was being fairly shared between all parties, especially between ELF and non-ELF users. Perhaps it was time to problematize the language behaviors of the native speaker/non-ELF speakers. However, before getting into such details, it would be helpful to offer a brief description/explanation of MUN simulations and clarify their relevance to ELF research.

## **2. Background to the Research**

### ***2.1. What is a MUN simulation?***

MUN stands for Model United Nations and the participants are referred to as delegates. Each delegate represents a nation state (and when possible that state is some other country than their own). MUN simulations bring together participants to consider and do research on a particular set of world problems in order to produce solutions called resolutions/action plans. Much preparation takes place before the simulation since the delegates must research their country's policies with regard to the topic/agenda at hand and then come up with solutions to the problems defined. The results of research and solution brainstorming will be included in a concise, technically stylized Position Paper, which will provide a starting point for the face-to-face negotiations at the MUN event. Team-building with other delegates who are representing the same country in different committees ensures that the research is deeper and well understood. Delegates also spend time trying to express all the ideas in their position papers verbally and spontaneously in order to increase their abilities to speak about the issues fluently and spontaneously.

At the MUN event there are a number of different interactional genres that the participants need to master: 1) Procedures, by which delegates can shape the direction of the meeting by making motions for a variety of actions (voting, suspension of the meeting) or expressing points of order and information, 2) Formal debate, in which delegates give timed, formal speeches in front of the meeting assembly to summarize their

positions or appeal to other likeminded delegates, 3) Informal debate/caucusing, in which delegates engage in face-to-face negotiation, in an attempt to find allies, persuade adversaries and promote cooperation. Informal debate/caucusing in MUN is a genre of great potential interest to researchers in communication and interaction, particularly in the ELF research world.

## **2.2. MUN and ELF as Communities of Practice**

MUN simulations can be considered a community of practice since they possess three criteria that according to Wenger (1998), characterize a community of practice – mutual engagement, a negotiated joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire. ELF encounters have also been described in terms of a community of practice:

The activity-based concept of community of practice with its diffuse alliances and communities of imagination and alignment fits ELF interactions well because ELF participants have heterogeneous backgrounds and diverse social and linguistic expectations. Rather than being characterized by fixed social categories and stable identities, ELF users are agentively involved in the construction of event-specific, interactional styles and frameworks. (House 2003, p. 573)

Mutual engagement, jointly negotiated communication using shared communication resources can be complicated when the interlocutors come from diverse backgrounds, which is nearly always the case in ELF interactions. The need to deal with this diversity requires ELF users to employ a range of accommodation strategies to ensure cooperatively negotiated understandings (Firth 1996; Meierkord 2000; Lee 2013) and the fact of being bilingual (or multilingual) may affect the quality of interactions in certain ways.

Emerging research (Toivo 2017) indicates that bilinguals experience ‘reduced emotional resonance of language’ (Caldwell-Harris, Ayçiçeği-Dinn 2009; Keysar *et al.* 2012; Costa *et al.* 2014) which has both positive and negative implications. On the negative side, a reduction of emotional resonance may lead to a withdrawal from social surroundings or a misfiring of emotion-laden words in the wrong emotional context. However, on the positive side “bilinguals can actually benefit from being able to approach things in a less emotionally involved way. For example, bilinguals have been shown to be able to make more rational decisions in their second language” (Toivo 2017). In fact, it may increase bilingual interlocutors’ ability to cooperatively seek consensus using a variety of communicative accommodation strategies.

Although accommodation strategies are available to all speakers from any language background, the strategies selected and ways they are used may be influenced by cultural beliefs and pragmatic expectations (Lee 2013). For example, according to research on pragmatic accommodation strategies by Lee (2013), East Asian ELF speakers adopt convergent pragmatic solidarity-building strategies such as repetition, paraphrase, and utterance completion (Cogo, Dewey 2012) that mirror their cultural values of positive politeness, consensus building and rapport strengthening. Thus, it is safe to assume that ELF speakers bring their own cultural communication habits to each interaction.

Yet the diversity inherent in ELF communication also encourages accommodation, negotiation and cooperation—ideally, these are also the features of successful MUN interactions. The complication in MUN events is that not all the participants/delegates identify as ELF users. Indeed it is hard to really describe who these speakers are. The traditional native/ non-native speaker dichotomy is not relevant with regards to ELF (Ferguson 2012), nor should it be when one considers the slipperiness and inadequacy of the term “native speaker” to describe a person’s communicative competence. Jenkins (2000) attempts to reimagine the native non-native dichotomy by suggesting concepts like Monolingual English Speaker, Bilingual English Speaker, and Non-Bilingual English Speaker.

Yet in some cases, “for lack of a better alternative” (Llurda 2009, p. 120), it may be practical to keep a native/non-native speaker dichotomy as a framework for certain kinds of sociolinguistic research (Haberland 2011) in which neither group is assumed to be inherently more proficient than the other but their journeys to become users of English have followed differing routes. This will be made relevant later.

### **2.3. The Native Speaker Problem**

Speaking English as an L1 offers no guarantee of an ability to interact successfully with a wide variety of interlocutors; there are many varieties of English, many of which are mutually incomprehensible (Ur 2010) and similarly, native speakers of these many varieties of English are not guaranteed to be successful interlocutors with users of ELF (Litzenberg 2013). Indeed, it may really be the case that English native speakers (however one may define the members of this group) are in especially acute need of training to adjust to a lingua franca world (Carey 2013). It has been reported elsewhere that when monolingual or otherwise communicatively unaware/insensitive English speakers use language that is “too quick, too garbled or overly colloquial” (Skapinker 2016), it can be argued that they are displaying a lack of communicative competence.

Figure 1 summarizes the student diversity at a recent MUN event held in New York City that hosted 6000 student delegates. The organization collects racial statistics for its US based participants and lumps all of the non-US participants into the category of “International” so our assumptions regarding the proportion of ELF users can only be speculative.

Nevertheless, based on personal experience and from a perusal of the conference program, the vast majority of “International” participants come from Europe (especially Germany and Italy) and Asia. So it is certain that a very large proportion of the speakers at this event are ELF users, even if they are not in the majority. Although other countries may differ, the students who qualify to become delegates from our university in Japan typically have no less than IELTS 7.5 and can be therefore comfortably classified as C2—the highest level of proficient user, according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

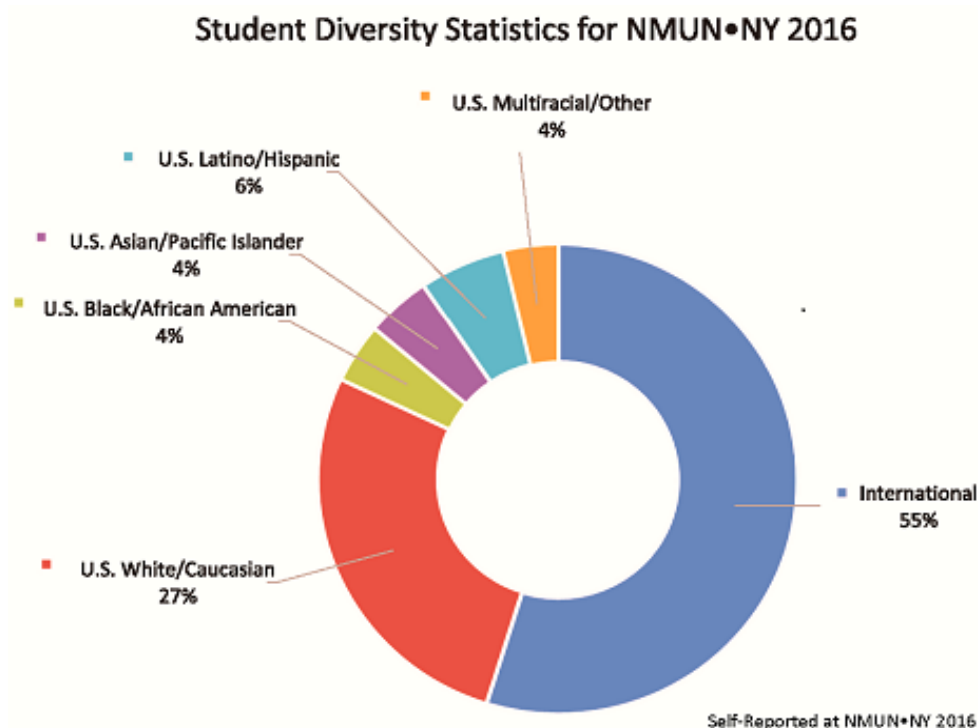


Figure 1  
Student Diversity NMUN NYC 2016.

As mentioned in the introduction, despite their strong capabilities, over the years our students have struggled to make their voices heard and ensure that their policies and ideas become included into the working papers that form the basis of the important draft resolutions. I began to wonder if the burden of communication, comprehension, and cooperation was being fairly shared between all parties, especially between ELF and non-ELF users. Perhaps it

was time to problematize the language behaviors of the native speaker/non-ELF speakers.

This brings us to the research questions for the present study:

1. Do ELF speakers encounter communication/comprehension difficulties when interacting with non-ELF (English native) speakers?
2. What are the sources/causes of these communication/comprehension difficulties?

### 3. The Study

Observations of ELF-speaking MUN delegates from Japan and Germany (n=22) were collected through a questionnaire containing an eight-item checklist and one open-ended prompt (see Appendix A) in order to get a sense of some of the shortcomings that native speakers display when communicating with ELF speakers in the context of MUN simulations. The eight checklist items probed possible trouble spots in: conversation management (Q1a, Q1b), cultural knowledge (Q1c, Q1g), manner of delivery (Q1d, Q1e), and lexical knowledge (Q1f, Q1h).

The reader is asked to bear in mind that this is just a preliminary pilot study with an extremely small sample aimed at getting an initial glimpse into this area of concern. The observations will later inform a list of recommendations for non-ELF speaker directed communication training.

## 4. Results: The Problems Detected

### 4.1. Checklist

Based on the results of the checklist, almost all of the delegates indicated that they had experienced communication/comprehension difficulties when interacting with non-ELF (English native) speakers. Only two delegates claimed to have never encountered comprehension problems related to those items. Table 1 shows the frequencies for each type of difficulty.

The most frequently cited problem areas related to manner of delivery and lexical knowledge. Nearly two-thirds noted that “a Native Speaker used vocabulary words that I had not heard before” and more than half of all respondents claimed experiencing a Native Speaker who “spoke so fast that I could not understand.” A solid third of respondents agreed that, “a NS used idioms/expressions that were unfamiliar to me.”

Less than a quarter of respondents reported any problems attributable to cultural knowledge or humor. No one reported problems with interruptions causing confusion and furthermore, interruptions leading to a feeling of frustration for the inability to finish an utterance, barely registered. Therefore, if one were looking for an instructional target, vocabulary, speed and idiom use would be promising starting points.

		J* (%)	G** (%)	J+G (%)
Q1a	a NS interrupted me so I got confused and forgot what I was saying.	0 (0.0)	0 (00.0)	0 (00.0)
Q1b	a NS interrupted me so I was frustrated by not being able to finish.	1 (10)	1 (8.3)	2 (9.1)
Q1c	a NS said something that probably needed cultural or special knowledge in order to understand.	3 (30)	2 (16.7)	5 (22.7)
Q1d	a NS spoke in long, complex sentences so I could not follow the meaning.	3 (30)	2 (16.7)	5 (22.7)
Q1e	a NS spoke so fast that I could not understand.	6 (60)	6 (50.0)	12 (54.5)
Q1f	a NS used idioms/expressions that were unfamiliar to me.	3 (30)	5 (41.7)	8 (36.4)
Q1g	a NS used some kind of humor but I could not get the meaning.	3 (30)	2 (16.7)	5 (22.7)
Q1h	a NS used vocabulary words that I had not heard before.	5 (50)	9 (75.0)	14 (63.6)

Table 1  
Questionnaire Responses from NMUN delegates (\*n=10, \*\*n=12).

These problem areas point specifically at poor skills of accommodation, which is defined as the “process by which speakers adjust their communicative behavior to that of their interlocutors in order to facilitate communication.” (Cogo 2010, p. 254) and validates the previous calls for and recognition of the need for training in accommodation directed at native speakers of English (Frendo 2016; Skapinker 2016).

#### **4.2. Delegate voices (Open-ended Question 2)**

Most of the students who responded to the questionnaire included a description of one or more of their own experiences. Among those that commented on the issue of speed, here is a sampling (verbatim, unedited):

*Some delegates wanted to introduce their working papers and policies and I could only understand half because they spoke fast.*

*Today my working group (not all of them) tried to (or did it) delete my points in our working paper. Thereupon I talked to them and point it [NS spoke too fast] out. Now they implemented my points.*

*A delegate spoke very fast during his speech. I had to focus to understand him.*

*When I was in a working group, NSs are too fast to speak so that it was a bit difficult to fit in the discussion.*

*I had a delegate explain to me about his policies and who went at it at lightning speed, and it was difficult for me to even come up with questions. I felt that after everyone has had experience explaining policies and stances to many delegates, people will start speaking a bit faster and sometimes omitting details.*

Here are comments that included references to vocabulary comprehension:

*Some NSs are using words that I never heard so sometimes it was hard to understand.*

*I was asked by other delegates about our working paper and I said “Let me see” and thought silently for a while because it is natural in Japan that we don’t speak aloud when we are thinking and I wanted to make sure what I would answer. But that delegate said “OK, who’s your leader? I’ll ask him” without any pause. I thought we need to answer instantly rather than perfectly accurate.*

*Some of the delegates use words which I have never heard before which does not bother me.*

*I often had to ask some NS about their used vocabulary (because I’ve worked very intense with many Canadians) and at some occasions I felt very dumb but they were very concerned about me getting their point. In some cases they seemed to feel ashamed not to be able to find a way to express themselves in a different way.--Canadians are great! Britains were often very fast!*

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

As Barlett and Johnson stated in 1998, “Native speakers need to become more aware of international business English: to modify their own language, to stop viewing these simplifications as sub-standard forms of English and to realize that they are missing out on an efficient communication tool” (p. 6) and “Whether native or nonnative, communicators need to learn (be taught!) to listen, make situational adjustments, and use sociopragmatic, situational potential to jointly create meanings and operational cultures” (Charles 2006, cited in Charles 2007, p. 279).



Frendo (2016) proposes to offer classes to train native speakers and non-native speakers at the same time in an array of business communication skills such as small talk, presentations, negotiations, and meetings. Among the benefits mentioned, the realization “that the native speakers are not necessarily the ones who do best in the negotiation role-plays, or presentations” which may be conversely a huge benefit to ELF speakers. The native speakers “come away with a greater awareness of their own limitations and an improved understanding of the strategies they might use in order to communicate most effectively in an international context... [by taking] part in role-plays, discussion etc. where it is what they say that counts, not the fact that they are native speakers” (Frendo 2016, n. p.).

Although it may be true that some people are able to accommodate to a certain extent without much or any direct training, they might need some help to learn how to better choose or vary their communication strategies (Sweeney, Zhu Hua 2010).

### **5.1. Specific Solutions**

The following are recommendations for dealing with Speed (adapted from a list by Halsdorf, 2013):

- Raise NS awareness of the definitions and effects of speaking either too fast or too slow.
- Raise NS awareness of why contractions (which contribute to speed) are confusing and best avoided.
  - Contractions are very difficult to perceive in the midst of conversation.
  - Some NNSs inadvertently delete them from their own speech.
- Raise NS awareness of the danger of consonant segmental deletion and elision (especially when two NSs start interacting) will result in a net increase in speed. Add to this a mix of local accents, dialects, or slang, the resulting speech stream will offer huge challenges in comprehension with very little communication payoff.
- Raise NS awareness of the confusion of expressions that create unclear word boundaries because of linking and vowel reduction in commonly reduced phrases that are not consistently taught in language programs (e.g., gonna, shoulda, diju).

Here are recommendations for dealing with Idioms (adapted from a list by Halsdorf 2013):

- Raise native speaker awareness of
  - what an idiom is.
  - how difficult they can be to understand.

- how common idioms are.
- Develop Native Speaker accommodation strategies
  - to make an idiom more transparent (if it is important to the discussion).
  - to monitor whether the idiom used is leading to misunderstanding
- Improve Native Speaker skill using a more globalized version of English that uses idioms sparingly.

The following recommendations are for dealing with vocabulary:

- Raise NS awareness of
  - The effect of their own use of jargon or technical vocabulary on other listeners
- Develop NS accommodation strategies
  - to monitor the effect of their talk on others – to be sensitive to signs of miscomprehension and more proactive in addressing the problem.
  - to make an unfamiliar or technical vocabulary item more transparent through the addition of a paraphrased definition.
  - to paraphrase complex propositions another way
- Improve NS skill using a more globalized version of English that uses jargon and technical vocabulary sparingly or in accordance with the current relevant community of practice.

## **5.2. Summary and Conclusions**

This small-scale pilot study sought to problematize the language behaviours of native speaker/non-cooperative speakers in order to better understand the difficulties that even highly proficient ELF speakers may be having in Model United Nations (MUN) simulations. Almost all of the ELF-speaking MUN delegates from Japan and Germany reported that they had experienced communication/comprehension difficulties when interacting with non-ELF (English native) speakers. The most frequently cited problems included use of unfamiliar vocabulary or idiomatic expressions and unnecessarily rapid speech rates.

Although the ELF speaking delegates graciously took responsibility for their own lack of comprehension, the kinds of problems they reported clearly show that the onus should also fall on their native speaker interlocutors who suffered from communicative insensitivity resulting in poor skills of accommodation. In order to rectify this communicative

shortcoming, it was suggested that native speaker delegates be encouraged to take communication courses prior to participating in a MUN simulation—ideally in partnership with ELF speaking delegates.

The preceding pages should indicate that everyone participating in ELF interactions has strengths and at the same time everyone has weaknesses. We need to learn to appreciate that communicating effectively is the goal and that doing so respectfully, cooperatively and benevolently is the way.

**Bionote:** Donna Hurst Tatsuki (Ed.D., Temple University, Japan) is Director of the Graduate School for English Language Education and Research at Kobe City University of Foreign Studies. Her research areas include cross-cultural pragmatics, language teaching materials development, conversation analysis, and storytelling/narrative design. Recent research projects include the representations of gender/ethnicity in government approved language textbooks, MUN preparation in the flipped classroom, ELF in MUN simulations, and narrative strategies in complex negotiations. Edited books include *Pragmatics: Teaching speech acts* (TESOL, 2010, with N. Houck); *Pragmatics: Teaching natural conversation* (TESOL, 2011, with N. Houck); *Storytelling: Repositioning Literary Texts in Language Teaching* (Foreign Studies Research Series, 90, Kobe Gaidai, 2015). *Fictions: Studi sulla narratività XV. Special Issue: Stories For Learning: Storytelling And Didactics* (Fabrizio Serra Editore, 2016); *Back to Basics: Filling the Gaps in Pragmatics Teaching Materials* (JALT, 2016 with D. Fujimoto); *Teaching Narratives* (Journal of Research Institute, 54, Kobe Gaidai, 2016).

**Author's addresses:** [dhtatsuki@rapid.ocn.ne.jp](mailto:dhtatsuki@rapid.ocn.ne.jp); [dhtatsuki@gmail.com](mailto:dhtatsuki@gmail.com)

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## Appendix A

### Communication during MUN Simulations

We are doing some research into the communication experiences of MUN simulation participants. Thank you in advance for taking time to answer.

Think back to interactions that you had with delegates who you think were Native Speakers (NS) of English.

Although you may have enjoyed your conversations, you might have also experienced some difficulties too. These moments of difficulty in communication are the focus of this research.

1. Please check (any or all of) the following things you may have experienced:

- ☐ a NS interrupted me so I got confused and forgot what I was saying.
- ☐ a NS interrupted me so I was frustrated by not being able to finish.
- ☐ a NS said something that probably needed cultural or special knowledge in order to understand.
- ☐ a NS spoke in long, complex sentences so I could not follow the meaning.
- ☐ a NS spoke so fast that I could not understand.
- ☐ a NS used idioms/expressions that were unfamiliar to me.
- ☐ a NS used some kind of humor but I could not get the meaning.
- ☐ a NS used vocabulary words that I had not heard before.

2. Please write about some specific examples with as much detail as you can remember. Use the back of this sheet if you need.